

There was a glint of madness in their eyes. And murder etched across their faces. Ominous shouts and cries of 'Koi sardar hai? Goli se maar dalenge' followed. We were all shocked into a state of stunned numbness.

We were a group of 20 Sikhs on our way to Delhi for a wedding. And when we boarded the Deluxe from Calcutta at 10 am on October 31, we had never imagined that death and destruction were in store for us.

It was at 12.30 pm that we first heard that Mrs Gandhi had been shot by her bodyguards and was in hospital. Our instant reaction was one of disbelief. The confirmed news of Mrs Gandhi's tragic assassination reached us over the radio at about 6.30 pm. And it was only then that we learnt that the two assailants were Sikhs. Every passenger irrespective of his religion was in a state of shocked silence. But not one had anticipated the disaster that awaited us at Ghaziabad.

The train reached Ghaziabad (two hours from Delhi) at 11 am the next day. That was the beginning of two harrowing hours for us, when we were suspended between life and death. A bloodthirsty mob, almost like a pack of hungry wolves hunting for prey, went from coach to coach in search of Sikhs.

In a frenzy of madness, the mob, armed with iron rods and knives, brutally dragged out Sikhs, burnt their turbans, hacked them to death and threw them across the tracks. Even the old and feeble were not spared. The barbaric mob, totally devoid of

"KOI SARDAR HAI?"

Weekly staffer Payal Singh describes the terror of a train journey on November 1.

rationality, declared that women would be spared. But in what sense were they spared? After all, what can be more torturous for women than seeing male members of their family hacked to death in front of their eyes?

The only sardars who were spared were the six with us. And all because of the concern and co-operation of the passengers in our coach. Before the train even halted at Ghaziabad, the hysterical mob had caught a glimpse of the six sardars with us. A fusillade of stones followed and the glass windows were smashed to bits. Shutters were hastily put down for protection. The police, we were told, could not control the wild mob and so they just turned their backs and walked away.

We had a ladies' compartment and the other passengers in our coach, realising there was more trouble ahead suggested that the sardars in our group occupy it. At first, they were reluctant but we literally forced them to stay inside. It was ironic. Sardars, who were historically known for their valour now had to protect themselves by hiding in a ladies' compartment or else become victims of a hysterical horde. Two ladies were sent into the 'ladies' compartment so that they could answer if any questions were asked.

The main doors of the coach

were locked from inside. And we waited with bated breath. The mob, hell-bent on destruction, was not to be deterred. Then it began. They pounded on the heavy metal door for over 15 minutes. The incessant pounding was accompanied by threats to set the train on fire. One non-Sikh passenger shifted uncomfortably in his seat and felt that all of them would lose their lives if the door was not opened. But he was sternly reprimanded by the others who declared that under no circumstances would the door be opened.

But the mob finally broke open the door. Their violent mutilation of the train had only whetted their appetite for more destruction.

The savage mob stormed into our coach. And walked past the ladies' compartment. But before we could even sigh with relief, they turned around and demanded that the door of the ladies' compartment be opened, so that they could check it.

By now our nerves had reached breaking point. Yet we couldn't lose our composure lest they suspect that something was amiss. We tried to convince them that there were just women inside but the mob was adamant. And began to bang on the door. They seemed to grow suspicious at the sight of a number of women outside the ladies' compartment and point-

ing towards us asked the other passengers, "Are these women travelling alone?" And before we could bat an eyelid, "No, they are with us," came the quick reply. The other passengers couldn't have been more co-operative.

The petrified screams of the two ladies from inside, our pleas and the persuasion of the other passengers finally seemed to convince the mob that there were no sardars inside. And the mob retreated. After two hours of excruciating agony, we could almost collapse with sheer relief.

We hoped that conditions in Delhi would be better. But no security arrangements had been made at the station. As a result, there were more than 500 sardars stranded at the waiting room, while the women left the station to make arrangements for them. I left the station at 3 pm with the ladies in our group, while the sardars with us—who were the only ones on the train to survive the ghastly disaster—waited at the station. They removed dead bodies from the train and assisted the injured. By 8 pm, we were successful in making arrangements for them to be taken out of the station.

In a state of stupefied silence, I saw bodies of sardars with rivulets of blood streaming down their faces, being unloaded from the train in which I had travelled. Brutally battered bodies of innocent Sikhs reached Delhi from other incoming trains as well. Innocent people who had done nothing. Except for being Sikhs and travelling towards Delhi on that fateful day.

committees were formed, to defend the locality from outsiders. At the individual level Sikh families were given shelter by Hindu, Muslim and other non-Sikh neighbours. That is why in these localities, the casualties mostly resulted from attacks on individual Sikhs found on the roads. However, in a few upper and middle localities houses were identified, attacked and people killed in dacoity-like operations; in some others, Sikhs could not be saved from well-organised, frenzied, large mobs.

The worst sufferers of the attacks were the poor in the resettlement colonies where the killers and looters carried out their operations on November 1, 2 and 3. In these colonies, the mobs were led by the local politicians and the criminal elements of the neighbourhood. Witnesses describe how a mob would go from house to house, call out the names of each person and drag him down to be hit, doused with kerosene, and burnt. Thus, it was not outsiders but some neighbours who led the attacks, killed, and helped the mobs to loot or burn.

However, among the poor Sikhs, the worst victims were those who were a little more prosperous as a result of employment in the Gulf countries. For instance in Sultanpuri, the scene of one of the worst carnages of the city, the blocks which were most seriously affected were A-4 and C-4 blocks which housed the relatively more prosperous among the Sikhs.

The kind of 'engineered riot' that Delhi witnessed raises a number of political and moral issues:

The first and the most important point to remember is that the victims of engineered riots are always substitutable. The Sikhs were attacked in these riots by the machinery of terror that has been built up in the city. The goondas who did the killing and looting were not doing so because they believed in a particular ideology or because they were religious fanatics. They did so because the political bosses, who provided them protection during normal times against the implementation of law, had ordered them to attack a particular group. Mrs Gandhi's death at most provided a vague

justification to these criminal elements for what they had to do in any case. We feel that it is perfectly within the worldview of these politicians to engineer similar attacks on other groups, be they religious, ethnic or political. What has happened to the Sikhs and in the earlier riots to the Muslims can any day happen to South Indians, Marwaris, leftists, harijans, students or supporters of opposition parties. The machine has been built. It is only a matter of time before it finds new victims.

Second, the law and order machinery in the capital of India was deliberately brought to a standstill for 48 hours, when the police, the administration and the army did not know about the appropriate authorities from whom orders could be received. Ordinarily the state confronts violence from a section of the people with more violence. Yet, in spite of the tremendous increase in the coercive apparatus of the Indian state in recent years, it remained silent and passive for three days while innocent citizens were

being systematically killed, since then the state has claimed insufficient coercive power for inaction. (Almost all police officers of Delhi accused of collaboration with rioters or of direct participation in the riot have pleaded that could not get reinforcements.)

Third, the manner in which autonomy of institutions has eroded can be witnessed in a case such as this. Though even relatively low-level officials of the state legally permitted to declare curfew, no one dared to do so in Delhi in the first two days of rioting because their superiors did not.

What is true of the law and order machinery is also true of the public broadcasting systems, working arms of the state. Not only was announcement of the death of Gandhi inordinately delayed,